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SUBJECT: BLAZE DESTROYS GOVERNMENT OFFICES IN TALLEST SOUTH
AMERICAN SKYSCRAPER

Summary

[1](#)1. (U) A fire ripped through 20 floors of the East Tower of Caracas' Parque Central complex the night of October 16. No one was killed, but the top third of the building was completely burned and the tower is unusable. Finger pointing to place the blame for the fire began immediately between the federal and city governments and a number of competing conspiracy theories are also making the rounds. The tower housed offices of a number of government ministries, including the Ministries of Infrastructure, Agriculture, and Production and Commerce. The offices of the civil aviation and ports and merchant marine institutes were also affected. A number of important data bases, including those relating to civil aviation, have been destroyed and, reportedly, no back up exists. End summary.

Fire Causes Extensive Damage

[1](#)2. (U) On October 17, a fire gutted the top 20 floors of the 56-floor East Tower of the Parque Central complex in downtown Caracas. These twin towers are the tallest buildings in South America. Dozens of firefighters were injured fighting the blaze, but no one was killed. The origins of the fire are still unclear, but according to the Caracas Fire Chief, the prevailing thought is that it began with an electrical short-circuit. It took the fire department 20 hours to bring the fire under control, in part because of a complete failure of the sprinkler system.

Who Is To Blame?

[1](#)3. (U) The blame game began immediately with President Chavez taking the lead during his weekly national broadcast on October 17. The politically appointed head of the Centro Simon Bolivar (CSB)--which administers the Parque Central--accused the fire department of incompetence. The head of the Caracas fire department, which reports to opposition mayor Alfredo Pena, blamed the extensive destruction on badly maintained fire suppression equipment in the building, and said the problems with the building electrical system had been brought up in several meetings with the CSB. Conspiracy theories tied to the government offices located on the floors where the fire is supposed to have started have also started making the rounds. These include allegations that the fire was started to hide the use of computers in electoral fraud on August 15 or to mask corruption in the management of the car title registry for the City of Caracas.

Multiple Government Offices Affected

[1](#)4. (U) The East Tower was home to numerous government offices, including those of the Ministry of Infrastructure, INAC (The Institute of Civil Aviation), INEA (the agency that regulates the ports and merchant marines), the Caracas Automobile Registry, the Ministry of Production and Commerce, and the Ministry of Agriculture. Many offices in the top third of the building, such as those of INAC, which was located on the floor where the fire started, were completely destroyed. Others on lower floors suffered extensive smoke and water damage. The full extent of the structural damage to the building is not yet known nor whether it can be reoccupied. In the meantime, ministry workers have been relocated throughout the city.

[1](#)5. (U) The Venezuelan Council of Ministers has extended a "declaration of emergency" for the affected offices which reportedly enables better resource sharing among ministries and allocates limited additional financial resources. Meetings that were to be held by the Economic Section with both INAC and INAPESCA (The National Fisheries Institute) have not been canceled, merely relocated. The Agriculture

Ministry plans to be fully operational in a temporary location within the next two weeks, and claims that most essential functions will only be temporarily slowed. The

Minister of Agriculture claims that, though the data and servers which housed ministry records were not damaged, it will take some time to gain access to the data. As a result, certain activities such as the issuance of animal import permits have been suspended.

Loss of Records

16. (U) The 'planoteca,' the nation-wide archive of blueprints and plans for public buildings and infrastructure, was destroyed according to news reports. As well, the office of Setra, which housed the records for automobile, truck and bus licenses and vehicle titles registered in Caracas, was completely incinerated. Contacts in INAC and INEA have told us informally that their record loss (both electronic and paper) is extensive and may include airport and port blueprints and diagrams and the civil aviation registry. Also affected are pilot, mechanic, and air traffic controller licenses; medical certificates; and airline certification documents. Even those offices that were not affected by the fire have extensive loss of records due to water damage. We understand that few, if any, of these records had backup copies maintained elsewhere. The government, however, is claiming that unofficial copies of various documents exist throughout the country.

Investigations Underway

17. (U) During his October 17 address President Chavez called for a comprehensive investigation into both the cause of the blaze and the problems that occurred in controlling the fire. On October 19, the administration created a 'High Level Committee' to evaluate the situation. This committee has thus far focused solely on recovery plans for the building and damage assessments. A preliminary report presented to President Chavez on October 20 recommends the demolition of the 22 most damaged floors of the tower. According to statements by Infrastructure Minister Ramon Carrizalez, the fire and its aftermath have been declared a 'state problem' which expands the scope of the committee's work to include nearby residential and commercial buildings in addition to the state offices. Carrizalez has also said that the committee will be investigating "every public building" to prevent similar incidents from happening.

Comment

18. (U) Since the Parque Central fire occurred on a weekend, a significant human tragedy was avoided. The extent of the property damage and other losses is not yet known, but some important governmental functions will undoubtedly be seriously affected. Despite calls for investigations into the systemic failures that contributed to the extensive damage of the Parque Central fire, government action thus far appears to be deflected away from the CSB which managed the building and toward establishing additional bureaucracies with loosely defined public mandates--hardly a recipe for expediency and success.
McFarland